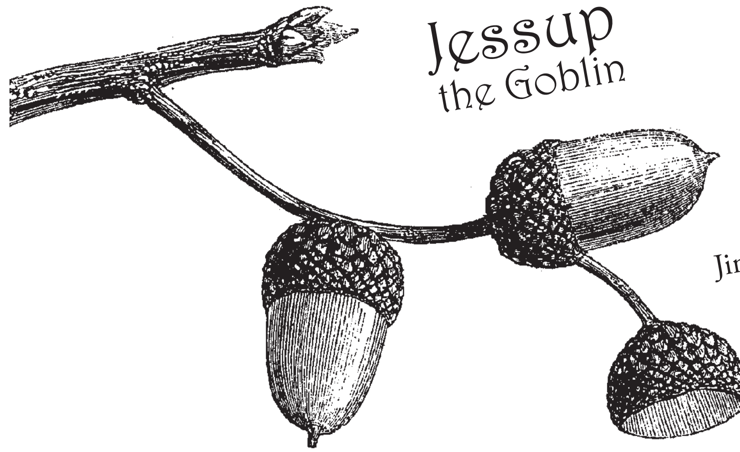
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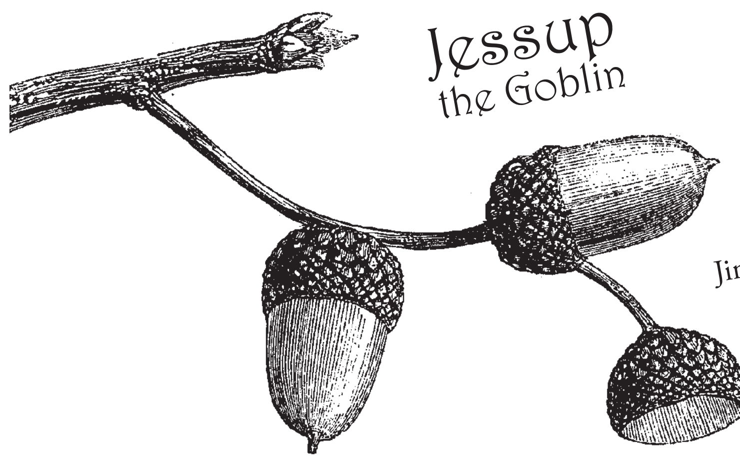
Jessup the Goblin



Jimmy T. Hand

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for I—

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"You've been listening to human malarky! 'All on your own?' What does that even mean? You mean with your own two legs, the ones that your parents gave you? Or do you mean the time away from chores so that you could practice, which the whole village gave you? Who decides what's fair, anyhow? Humans? Would it be 'fair' if we fought the humans one-on-one so they could just stomp us into the ground?"

Jessup sniffled, but stopped crying. He understood that his grandgoblin was right.

"Come on. After dinner we'll sneak over to this Benny fellow's tent and I'll teach you how to curse someone good and proper."

And for the first time that day, Jessup smiled.

Once, not so long ago but in a place very different from here, there lived a little goblin boy. As everyone knows, all little goblins are called boys until they grow up and pick whether they want to be a goblin man or goblin woman or something else entirely.

This little goblin's name was Jessup, and he wanted to be a runner more than anything else in the world. In those days, people used runners to pass messages between one village and the next. They had telephones, of course, but ringing someone up was considered rude and was only done in emergencies.

Every spring, each village held competitions to see which goblins were the fastest. The winners competed against the human boys in the

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great summer festival. Human children, of course, are both boys and girls. But the girls weren't allowed to compete because human culture is sexist.

Jessup practiced running every day and almost every night. He always stretched before and after, and he pushed his little green body to the edge of its endurance. But still, he was not very good at it. His legs were a little bit short, as was his breath.

One day, his grandgoblin came out from the hovel and found him crying by the slaughterhouse. Jessup had hoped the death-cries of the cats would cover his own sobs, but he was wrong.

"What's the matter?" Jessup's grandgoblin asked.

"I want to be a runner," Jessup said.

"And you will be."

"But I'm not very fast."

The signal gun went off, and Jessup was left in the dust. He lost, by a lot. The shame crept into his face and hit his tear ducts, and suddenly he wished there was a slaughterhouse to hide behind. Instead, he faced the cheering humans of the audience.

Later, in the family tent, his grandgoblin approached him. "Let me see that acorn. I must have screwed up the enchantment somehow."

Jessup told his grandgoblin about Benny. The old goblin jumped up, landed in the splits, and then did a handstand. Goblins do this sometimes when they're really, really angry. If they're only a little bit angry they leave off the handstand.

"Of course it was bloody magic! What kind of monster would lie to a child? If you'd needed a pep talk, I'd have given you a pep talk. What you needed was a magic acorn!"

At this, Jessup started crying again. "I wanted to win all on my own, fair and stuff."

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"Maybe you're right," Jessup said.

"Of course I'm right. Here, let me see it."

Gathering his strength and his self-esteem as best he could, Jessup handed the magic acorn to Benny, who crushed it underfoot. At that moment, the human team scored their first goal of the game, and half the crowd roared.

"There," Benny said. "You're the best goblin runner. You still are. The power has always been inside you."

The next morning, Jessup banished his insecurities and went out to the track. He'd won every race he'd been in, and he'd practiced every day. Of course he was good enough.

He didn't even worry overmuch when the human champion, Benny, came and took a place next to him.

"That's okay," his grandgoblin explained, "as long as you get there eventually. Lots of people are bad at their jobs, but society gets along fine. What matters is that you do what you enjoy."

"But I want to win the race!"

"Oh," his grandgoblin said, "well, in that case, I'll see what I can do."

Jessup stopped crying, and the two went home just in time for turnip and guano soup.

The next day, Jessup ran and ran. Then, just before sundown, his grandgoblin appeared and handed him an acorn.

"This isn't a normal acorn," the wise old goblin said.

"Yes, I can see that. The shell is cracked and the meat has rotted."

"And it's magic. As long as you've got that acorn in your pocket, you'll never lose a race."

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Sure enough, when the time came, Jessup outran every boy in his village. He still practiced every day, but just because he loved to run.

When summer came, his whole clan—bristling with spears and blunderbusses, since humans were not very trustworthy—went with him to the festival grounds that lay between goblin and human territory.

Jessup had never seen such a place. The humans were giants, some up to two meters tall. Even the boys were as tall as a full-grown goblin. They ate revolting foods, like the flesh of herbivores, even bird meat. Some were the color of pigs, and their smell was overpowering. Still, they smiled the same as any goblin, and Jessup knew that deep down, humans were people too. Even if they had the habit of, once every few generations, trying to wipe out all of goblinkind.

Jessup left his family to watch the games. There were human-only events like horseback jousting and there were goblin-only events like dogback polo,

but the most spectacular were the all-people sports: archery, clock-building, and football. Goblin football teams, of course, had twice or three times the players; team size was determined by weight.

It was at a football match, the night before the foot race, that he met Benny. Benny was a human boy, only half again Jessup's height, with gangly limbs and wild hair. Jessup liked him immediately. Benny was interested in Jessup's story, and asked question after question of the goblins' champion runner.

Jessup told Benny about the acorn, and showed it to him.

"Bumblesticks," Benny said. "That's nothing but a rotten old acorn."

"No, it works. I've won every race."

"You've spent the last ten minutes talking about how much you practice. Your grandgoblin just gave you that silly thing he picked off the ground so that you'd have self-confidence. It's bonkey-juice, that's what it is."

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